

Counterfactuals and futures histories: retrospective imagining as an auxiliary for the scenarios of expectance

Schmid, Georg

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:
GESIS - Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Schmid, G. (2009). Counterfactuals and futures histories: retrospective imagining as an auxiliary for the scenarios of expectance. *Historical Social Research*, 34(2), 74-87. <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.34.2009.2.74-87>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more Information see:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Counterfactuals and Futures Histories. Retrospective Imagining as an Auxiliary for the Scenarios of Expectance

Georg Schmid*

Abstract: »Ungeschehene Geschichte und Zukunftsgeschichten. Retrospektive Vision als Hilfskonstruktion für die Szenarios der Erwartung«. Unquestionable as history may seem, there are all the same quite different readings and disparate inferences despite the same series of facts. This goes to show that even professional historians can sometimes be overcome by meditations on past possibilities of bifurcations. As to “alternatives to actual history,” it serves well to bear in mind that few are plausible, but that belief in a predeterminative universe of necessities would certainly be misplaced. Whereas some occurrences are clear-cut enough to make us understand which components would have had to be changed in order to get a different outcome, others are of such a high degree of complexity that attempts to imagine an alternative course and divergent results remain rather illusory: the examples of Midway (the former type) and the defeat of France in 1940 (intricately overdetermined) clearly show that it pays in any case, in defiance to all complexities, to consider past potential. It is prerequisite for choosing between future options in more reasonable and efficient ways than hitherto.

Keywords: Counterfactual History, Midway, Battle of France, Future Histories.

Winston Churchill has famously asked the question what would have happened if the South had *not* won the Civil War (Churchill 1931). This query, simple at first sight but remarkably ingenious, demonstrates nearly right away the epistemological value of counterfactual investigations. Not least, it ushers in the quandary of perspective: hindsight facilitates judgments but forces you to take forward movements into account, too. It is a matter of what we could call general interpretability. And in order to clarify this notion I'll talk about the interpretability of war and peace. Wars – and whether and how they could have been avoided – indeed are the most notable and consequential “switches” where history might have taken another course. And peace is surely tantalizing and endlessly challenging to achieve.

Evidently, the outbreaks of wars are among the historians' favorite conjunctions: they are amongst the best-documented clusters of historical facts and courses of events. Indeed, even their dénouements, the peace treaties, are. All the same, even here, perhaps particularly so, divergent readings, reinterpretations,

* Address all communications to: Georg Schmid, Les Bussières, St-Oradoux-près-Crocq, F-23260, France; e-mail: georg.schmid@wanadoo.fr.

tions, all kinds of lingering confusions seem to persist. They indicate that there is much uncertainty, thus anxiety despite finally model clarity. Revisionisms of all kinds, gradual as well as radical ones, offer ample proof; recently, there has been Nicholson Baker's unpleasant one in regard to World War II. And, of course, one of the younger "spiritual fathers" of our counterfactuals, Niall Ferguson (though he has traded with other things, too) is to be encountered in the vicinity, too: Britain could have "stood aside." (Ferguson 1997).

There might be a yearning, at least post factum and psychoanalytically easily accounted for, to see things turn out differently. They didn't turn out well; what if they had turned out more advantageously—*otherwise*. All these "other-wises" have an immense advantage: they cannot be put to the test. It is conceivable that one of the most recent publications on counterfactuals — *Explaining War and Peace* (Goertz, Levy 2007) — is in fact motivated by a largely pre-conscious (and hardly acknowledgeable) wish that the twentieth century's "thirty years war" had not taken place. (We could also say, the eighty years war, if we comply with Philip Bobbitt [Bobbitt 2002 and 2007].)

Had that Thirty or Eighty Years War not taken place, in effect, Europe would in all probability not have resigned from the premier position in world politics and thus history. (Most likely it is premature to speculate about Europe regaining that prestigious station because of the seeming downfall of the U.S.: Europe, up until the Crisis, has done clearly less well than the U.S. in GDP per person as well as in regard to purchasing-power parity and other indicators. And as Europe is, at least in terms of population, bigger than the U.S. it can also be suspected that it will fall all the harder still.) There is, in Ian Kershaw's words, "no inexorable path to be followed." (Kershaw 2008)

It is, I suspect, exactly in these zones that counterfactuals are becoming most momentous. They demonstrate that there are always choices to be made, that there are alternatives and options, that there is no preordained pattern of progression. Kershaw goes on to explicitly say, "This is *not* counter-factual or virtual history of the type which makes an intellectual guessing-game of looking into some distant future and projecting what might have happened had some event not taken place." (Kershaw 2008: 6) It is not devoid of salient irony that one sentence later he states: "Nevertheless, it could fairly be claimed that historians implicitly operate with short-range counterfactuals in terms of alternatives to immediate important occurrences or developments. Otherwise, they are unable fully to ascertain the significance of what actually did take place." (Ibid.) We should also note that the future is expressly made reference to; moreover, we could remark that there's much to be said for parlor games of a high intellectual standard.

My examples for presenting some arguments in favor of those constructive, ambitious "games" are mindful of the different degrees of possible "counterfactualization." Jumping ahead a bit, I argue right away that there are some instances where minor changes lead to definitely different outcomes — in rather

straightforward situations with but a few decisive actants —, whereas it must indeed be said that, the more complex the settings get, second (or third, etc., etc.: fourth, n-th) degree counterfactuals rapidly pose colossal if, in principle, theoretically not insurmountable problems: at which “tier” could you possibly stop developing ever more, still more, tendentially infinite alternatives?

Applying Bobbitt’s schema, we’ll talk about the “Eighty Years War,” the second part of which I have termed the second act of the twentieth century’s Thirty Years War, World War II then. In regard to the third act (the Cold War) and beyond (what some already call the Fourth World War, the War Against Terror or The Clash of Civilizations etc.), I’ll leave it at a few interspersed remarks. We are in the process of moving on to the next play anyway; we don’t know anything yet about the number of its acts.

The second act of the last Thirty Years War is said to have been enacted (or rather reenacted: but that remains to be seen) by countless war games in military academies and think tanks and the like without ever delivering the actual *historical* result. In “replaying” those acts, the outcomes typically deviated. Course and result appeared to be basically *not reproducible*. I will, then, mainly be talking about Midway and the *étrange défaite*.

Midway, no doubt, represents the easier proposition; it lends itself to counterfactualization without setting up major hurdles. Though without doubt decisive for the course of the war — and just possibly its ultimate outcome —, the interchangeable factors appear to be mainly military ones and are thus considered to be more readily analyzable. The downfall of France in 1940, on the other hand, seems characterized by lots of non-linear constituents which are, what is more, widely non-military in nature and generally highly complex. The defeat cannot be explained by referring to strategic and tactical considerations alone, and French society, mental set-ups and collective mentalities have proved to be largely immune to necessary or appropriate adaptations. The other way around, nonetheless, it is possible to argue that first-rate French military action might have stumped Nazi Germany (which would at least have changed the course of the war, if not halted it altogether or have led to another conclusion); whereas at Midway an American attitude, more propitious to improvisation than the Japanese mental set-up would render possible, surely has to be counted among the decisive factors. Imaginably, this American disposition has taken shape in an ideal fashion in the person of Raymond Spruance. At any rate, both examples — Midway as well as the defeat of France — present first-class lessons for future action.

It serves well to remember the exorbitant American numerical inferiority during the events leading up to and at Midway: comparing, in sequence, battle-ships, carriers, cruisers, destroyers and submarines at the disposal of, first, Japan, second, USA the numbers are overwhelming — 11/nil, 8/3, 22/8, 65/18, 21/25. Just a handful more subs, but practically eight carriers to two, as one of the American carriers, the *Yorktown*, limping, perhaps more of a hindrance than

being of much help (and then actually lost, sunk on June 7, trying to hobble home), had hardly even been repaired after the damages inflicted in the Coral Sea just some weeks earlier. An overwhelming Japanese superiority, then and in no way a result which had to be expected.

But it's probably superfluous to rehash the battle of Midway as such: it is too well known, and the account given by Theodore Cook is surely sufficient for anyone not specializing in naval history (Cook 2000). Let's rather look at arguments somewhat distinct from the classical military reflections without, however, discounting the latter in any way. Some might be familiar with the movie *Midway*, dating from 1976, with Glenn Ford in the role of Spruance and Henry Fonda as Chester Nimitz. This somewhat underrated film has clearly been intended to contribute to (or, in a sense, even initiate) a Japanese-American reconciliation which, to be sure, had been going on at that time already (otherwise that movie would hardly have been conceivable). Still, in military matters things positively are of a different caliber. This contribution to an attempted integration of Japan into the Western sphere surely represents a kind of "correction running counterfactually" to the course actual history has taken.

Basically, we could argue that the *Midway* film is based on the perfectly simple dramaturgical proposal: who'd have thought that such an outcome was possible? It is masked, to a certain extent, by model conciliatory gestures – in their turn corresponding with the fact that the film was coproduced by Japan, and "symbolically" nicely expressed by the fact that the Japanese speak English, too (which, even at that time, wasn't necessarily standard filmic technique anymore: think of, for example, *The Great Escape* or *A Bridge Too Far*). And there is, for instance, the not just rhetorical question, Have we (the Americans) just been luckier, the innuendo being, of course, that "we" have in fact been better.

Which is true. (And it is not a matter of minor importance that Spruance taught at Annapolis after the war: although many did who had been much less distinguished than he, to say the least.) This, then, is clearly not just a reading of the movie. Naturally, Glenn Ford is the "ideal Spruance" – and though a small role, and arguably the last of any importance in his long career, Ford makes use of it with bravura (witness the one short scene showing his reaction, or rather his near-nil reaction when his buddy Charlton Heston crashes his crippled fighter on the flight deck of Ford's carrier).

In fact, *Midway* is one of the rather rare instances in history where very probably one actant has been decisive. Substitute Spruance (by any other guy, even an extremely talented one) – and the whole outcome of Midway is to be questioned. If – *if* – William Halsey hadn't been taken out of the equation by sudden illness, Spruance, who'd had no carrier experience worth speaking of, would hardly have gotten command of the two able carriers *Enterprise* and *Hornet*. Person-centered and fixated you could go on: *if* Jack Fletcher, in over-

all command, wouldn't immediately have ceased it to Spruance when *Yorktown* was shot away from under him, forcing him to change ships.

But these are points I do not wish to elaborate on in a protracted manner. Rather, my main argument is – in a recent book (Schmid 2009) as well as in a forthcoming one on the “narrations of our futures” – that these switches (in a double sense as I will demonstrate right away) lead to ever more switches (or bifurcations): second, tenth, umpteenth tier counterfactuals. And that is, I argue, a point usually missed or not taken into sufficient consideration.

Talking of forks: “switches” in railway parlance. If you imagine a switch yard (or shunting yard), each switch leads to more switches and more bundles of tracks. Consequently, when you select, say, the left track at switch one, you get to another switch than the one you'd have gotten to if you'd chosen the right track at switch one. In each case, however, the switches lead to still other switches, over and over again. – The familiar problem of second-order counterfactuals. However, the decisive point to keep in mind is that you have no way of knowing *which “route”* (which course) *will be chosen after the first choice* (or selection). The possibilities increase in an exponential curve. They snowball.

Secondly, the railway metaphors (the mental images they are conjuring up, to be precise) are utterly misleading – though extremely popular. Read for instance Kershaw, writing about Hitler's decision to attack the Soviet Union: “[...] the *points* were *switched* irreversibly onto the *track* [...]” (Kershaw 2008: 70, my italics). But at the end of the shunting depot all the tracks are combined, connected again: the train is formed, “composed” (formed) and destined to roll onto the main or trunk line. Here you are: you're getting the impression that, after a number of deviations, everything falls back into a sort of preordained pattern of regulated traffic. This is false reasoning.

There wouldn't have to be. *If* we could put all that shunting to the test we'd realize that the metaphorical crutch itself is quite unsuitable. The whole idea of bundles of tracks ultimately, at the exit of the yard, leading back to the mainline, because of the architecture of the shunting yard, is simply nonsense. That erroneous logic can be well observed in the reflections about Midway. An American defeat would have prolonged the war, they say. Yes, no doubt, but eventually, we tend to think, the result would – *supposedly* – have been much the same. Hypothetically, we'd get to the “identical” end result. But this is just a supposition: it ain't necessarily so.

Consider just two conspicuous items: who is to decree that neither an imaginable demoralization a defeat at Midway would have caused nor the necessity of transferring enormous amounts of naval equipment from the Atlantic to the Pacific would not have had further momentous consequences – many further ones, an ever increasing number, the sheer number of which would lead us along an arithmetic and possibly infinite series of ever more changes of the supposed “ultimate outcome.” The magnitude of these series cannot be esti-

mated – and their qualitative effects much less: some positions or phases removed from, onwards of the initial bifurcation, some way further along the new route and timeline, we'd be somewhere *and somehow* else altogether. In fact, there is an exponentially proliferating number of timelines and routes. Who is to say that "History" would have *rerailed* itself onto the track we know?

We should discard metaphors such as this altogether. Before we can do so, however, we'll have to analyze another one – briefly and quickly. Alternate historical scenarios are usually imagined somewhat like railway accidents – here are the trains again. (Metaphors have an irritating habit of developing a sort of autonomy). Trains derail – but, strangely, there is no final disaster, in a quite wondrous way, the wrecked trains rerail themselves. Seemingly, they do so in order to transport us back to the historical course, the proper track or trunk route, we are familiar with. Now, it wouldn't make much sense to go on with these auxiliary constructions were it not for the fact that metaphORIZING like that is, as I've deplored, so frequently the basis for far-reaching deductions. Just think of Thompson's "streetcar challenge" (Thompson 2007: 113sq.): is it only a matter of streetcars that failed to arrive and of streetcars that did arrive (or what alternative catalysts are coming into play)? I do not think that a metaphorical crutch like this actually "alter[s] our understanding of the explanatory significance of other variables." (Ibid., 113.)

I am tempted to respond in a kindred manner – by taking the metaphors seriously, realistically. If the F car on Market Street doesn't arrive (because the PCC is blocked behind a slower moving Peter Witt), I simply take one of the trolleybuses also using the Market Street corridor, the 5 or 6, say, and I'll still go electric: so we've made a "trackless trolley conundrum" out of the "streetcar challenge." Of course, I could also go underground and take a subsurface J, K, L, M or N car (the last-mentioned one would even take me to the Giants' stadium and the Caltrain depot) or go still deeper and take a BART train.

Seriously. Questionable metaphors such as these can all too easily deteriorate into jargon, all together too specialized nomenclature, impressive on first sight but ultimately less useful than assumed. Thinking along the lines of "systemic accidents," for instance, presupposes that there are systems more or less given to a status of "accident proneness;" never mind that we can distinguish between, say, limited and extensive understanding – because it is inevitably *us* who decide what counts for good or deficient understanding in the case in question.

Regardless of that, any kind of interaction between both nonlinear and complex components results in "chain reactions." And we cannot even be sure to what an extent the arbitrarily designated complex and nonlinear bundles intermingle. Foreseeing things is not dependent on that; categorizations may sometimes be helpful but are not in themselves explicatory agents in regard to decisions and decision-makers.

The solution I propose to overcome those snags (I've briefly mentioned just a couple) is threefold. First, it is necessary to go beyond the thinking in metaphors – though there are better ones than forks, shunting yards and arriving tramways or other means of transport failing to arrive. We might, for instance, think of Michael Flynn's "forest of times" (Flynn 1998), a metaphor too, if there ever was one, but at least a more appropriate one: there is a quasi infinite number of sproutings of buds, leaves, twigs from just one sapling (and they never again come together again like the tracks of a depot to regain the configuration of just one railway track). Or, as Dennis Lehane has beautifully put it, "[...] all those different who-she-could-have-beens fork out like trails before us, branching off and branching off [...]" (Lehane 2006, 85)."

Second, it is pertinent to pose the respective questions in reverse. We should, to stick to the Midway example, ask what must positively *not* be changed in order to retain the familiar, "authentic" outcome. Paradoxically, we could take away a lot of the vessels Yamamoto had for the Aleutians and Midway and still "achieve" an American victory at Midway. However, we must not eliminate Spruance (or very probably even reduce him to a lesser role) because this would (extremely plausibly) make the vastly superior Japanese forces prevail.

Third, and most importantly, we have to ponder the counterfactuals by *comparing them to our expectations*. This last point merits a profound inspection, a close-up, so to speak. The hypothesis is that, in history, we largely see what we want to see: without hardly ever realizing it, we at least privilege what we crave, relegating, pushing back what is unpleasant. That means not least that we project our present-day dispositions and our *wishes for the future* unto past chains of events and their structural arrangement and signifiatory value. The choice of topics, all kinds of taboos and obsessions and the way questions are asked (unconsciously preprogramming answers) offer ample proof. And we must not disregard that often the motive for "doing" counterfactuals consists in an acknowledged or repressed effort to reinterpret parts of history along the lines of "preferable alternates" (this is, of course, the space where revisionisms of all kinds lie in ambush).

I propose to take a close look at the *étrange défaite* which so much puzzled Marc Bloch – and not only him. This impression of "strangeness" can be attributed to the contemporary inconceivability that France would *not* be able to repulse Nazi Germany – a lack of likeliness which, in a manner of speaking, kept its luster at least in military academies around the world. (Let's not forget: the German general staff was quite loath to go against the famous French forces.) It also results from a posteriori reflections on that sensational, devastating rout which reveal two entirely different, indeed contradictory, readings. One of them instills a substitutive plausibility – France repels Germany: World War II takes on an entirely different appearance. The other one, in no way inconsistent with actuality, affirms that a very quick German victory over

France has been inevitable: its “predestinationism,” however, makes History appear immutable, inflexible, just *kismet*, simply something to await and accept. This explains, of course, why we tend to be in love with counterfactuals: basically, most among us, I suspect, dislike *kismet*.

The assumption that France’s defensive systems could have been successful is based on mainly if not purely military considerations or, to be more precise, on the study of strategies and some armament data and the respective evaluations and similar conjectures. (For example: France’s tanks were technically not a priori inferior to the German ones, taking into account differences in armoring, maximum speed and radius of action; their use in tactical terms, however, was asinine; the German planes were much less superior in performance than is often inferred but more numerous, better supplied and, above all, better used.) But what really counts is the general willingness to use arms in order to be left in peace, a real readiness to defend public ideas and goods, ways of life and moral standards, a basic affirmation of one’s society’s principles.

To be sure, the social atmospheric, the status of a community, its inner concord or discord can be imagined differently, alternately, counterfactually, too. But that, in most cases and in all likelihood, is not more than retrospective wishful thinking. The imaginary substitution of one collective mentality by another at any given point in time, requires a veritable in-depth rewriting of long portions of the historical processes resulting in clearly differentiable effects.

The retrognostic scenario “France defends itself successfully against the German aggressor” can be traced to what might be called a generic Allied interpretation of history. That is to say, there is a more or less a priori assumption that the “Western democracies” have common interests – and see things that way –, regularly act in unison, and that their harmonious relationships are based on unfailing loyalty. This assumption obviously is dangerously close to a sketch of encumbering wish-fulfillment: witness the obnoxious present-day discord Europe-America, not caused by genuine divergence of interests but by base antipathy.

Today, it is easy to see that France’s humiliating defeat in 1940 does not sit well with the conception, foreign as well as domestic, of French *grandeur* and *honneur*. But the world wants to believe in France, and the French do anyway, if in a convoluted and somewhat aberrant fashion. An honorable country is supposed to defend itself impeccably, as best it can, and corresponding with its greatness which must manifest itself in military matters as well as in others such as culturedness or intellectual life.

The military clout and actual effectiveness, superfluous to say, demands economic affluence which, in the necessary measure, cannot easily be mustered by countries less large (“*grand*”) than supposed. And it cannot be invoked by verbal means; political and military greatness cannot simply be stated or sum-

moned up; insistence on it in the case of its blanket absence is embarrassing and draws attention to divergences between pretense and actuality. The French catastrophe of 1940 definitely runs counter to most of the preconceived notions – prejudices indeed – that were held at the time (and, in large part, still are); conceited discourses had widely replaced actual ability; the mere phantom of greatness obscured a decisive lack of acumen, competence, volition.

It should be more evident now why I just mentioned expectations. They reflect and reverberate, they are interlinked with how past experiences are seen, their antecedents inevitably shape them. Past facts, in turn, are interpretatively modified in a way so that they can be harmonized with a longed-for immaculate ideation of the future, held in check only by pessimism (or rather skepticism), in its bastardized form manifesting itself as morosity and sulkiness. At any rate, we have to think in terms of continuity: the French example, perhaps because it has so much to do with traditionalism and duration, shows that “historical experience” is irrevocably coupled with evaluation of the present and expectations of the future. That means that counterfactuals should be posited as hinges or links between a social perception of future possibilities and social impressions of the past.

Continuity and contingency, then. Nothing about 1940, especially France’s 1940, is comprehensible without reference to *la Grande Guerre*. And it has not become more understandable ever since. Two indicia: in the autumn of 2008, once again, for the umpteenth time, France collectively, massively, repetitively “celebrated” the war of 1914. Seemingly unconnected to this occurrence, some in Europe still adhere to the unacknowledgeable (and contemptible) notion of never forgiving the United States to have saved them twice. Perhaps some would like to “skip” 1914 in order to be able to leave the Americans out of the equation.

But there are preconditions for speculations, among them the exigency of establishing a clear order of “past pluralities” in terms of their probability. Difficult if not altogether impossible as it may be to imagine a victorious France in 1940, it is still possible to imagine World War I as “avoidable” – thus eliminating World War II, at least in the shape we know so well. But this retrospective scenario must not be motivated by mere antagonism for the United States: if we want it to be serviceable, it has to be based on a substantial number of alternative factors.

You see the catch: these two bundles of circumstances – present-day vile motives and the complexity of aggregates of assumable differences – are of a different order of magnitude and diverge in terms of the respective degrees of complication and connectivity. “To argue for the inevitability of World War I [...] is an attempt to root the disaster deep in a political culture which all shared [...] and upon which all acted in 1914, Germany and Austria-Hungary precipitating the final descent into the maelstrom.” (Schroeder 2007, 193.) Well put. Going beyond primitive anti-Americanism, two comments at least intrude

nonetheless: a French success in 1940 presupposes defensive preparedness, an entirely functional society – and thus an utterly different gestalt of the collective mentality –, whereas, arguably, avoiding 1914 would “merely” presuppose a different mentality of the ruling castes.

Moreover, one could argue that the War’s first act was more about a “concert of powers” and their exalted leaders, though leading promptly to a second act of what we could term a “popular” war – of peoples, whole populations, then –, a clash of two unremittingly different world views: the authoritarian-totalitarian one and the democratic-capitalistic one. Different orders of magnitude, but still interlinked, not only temporally opposed political conceptions, democracy versus tyranny, then: an array or alignment today echoed by Occident versus Fundamentalism. Which, of course, makes us passionate about the whole thing, whether we know about it or not.

It is less difficult to see now that our desire-based “inscriptions” in history run in both directions. Think, as an illustration, of France again: in 1940 still obsessed (and it is still even today!) with 1914, all the same forced to think about the future, if in an entirely gloomy way. To be sure, “1914” doubtlessly meant that at least some German politicians really thought in terms of a “Griff nach der Weltmacht” – thus being oriented to a (seductive) future. But to what an extent and in which way is this still relevant for the future?

Connections such as these – dreams of world power on the one hand and the fraudulent affection for “soft power” – go on. This misleading, dishonest – and in a way “counterfactual” – rationalization in the second degree (as though verbal conjurations of “soft power” would exculpate the European war-mongering past) generates self-deception and is also a dead give-away in regard to hidden motives. What’s going on today has to be interpreted both as a distant echo of this war in two acts – even going so far as to shrewdly and dishonorably, if always a bit occulted, ascribing much blame to America (we know the lore, quite conspiracy-leaning, come to that: Churchill and Roosevelt as the war mongers) – and also, in regard to ambitions for the future, as an utterly unadmittable craving for attaining a sort of status quo ante.

Traumatizing experiences and impending anxiety see to a strange amalgamation on the basis of collective imaginations. But they are never astute enough to allow us to completely – actively, so to speak – *repress*. Let’s take another example: the fact that we survived the Cold War, the atom bomb scare, the objective probability of complete extermination (the climax of which surely has been the Cuban missile crisis) does in no way make us immune to future threats (specifically, ABC weapons potentially in the hands of just about everyone).

There is an obstacle there which, to the best of my knowledge, has so far never been properly addressed, let alone analyzed in a principled way. The mutual relations between a “survived past” and a future assumed to be survivable suggest a kind of perfect symmetry where there only is an incomplete one.

On the other hand, there seems to be incomparableness because there is just one course in the past while there is, in principle, a practically unlimited number of future prospects.

But this is erroneous. Here, then, is my main proposition. We have to hold on to counterfactuals at all costs – and we have to provide them with the status of untouchable epistemological instruments – because, in fact, there are “many pasts,” too. All but one of them may be deficient, outright false, often intentionally, criminally misleading – as there are dishonorable, disfiguring “conspiratorial readings” of history –, but as hardly anyone knows anything about the real history, all those crude and often outright insane readings coexist with “the real thing” – they do have more concrete influence than sane, rational, reasoned *and correct* accounts. Spoilt, corrupted histories, plural, compete with the real one, disfiguring it beyond recognition: but the corrupt appearance more often than not is the guiding principle for many.

In short, there are, in fact, not only countless futures but numerous pasts, too. Our tremendous difficulties with preparing ourselves for “the things to come” must not only be explained by the logical incompatibility of a unilinear (unambiguous) past and a multilinear (assumable) future. They have to take into account the falsifying of history, too.

There are further quandaries, though. Karen Hellekson mentions some of them – and in passing I affirm that, personally, I don’t really differentiate too much between scholarly counterfactuals and literary alternates –: it is, as Hellekson justly points out, widely a question of “[...] narrative techniques that fiction and history share.” (Hellekson 2001: 29.) And: “The link between cause and effect is always an interpretation made by the person looking.” (Ibid.) (So much is evident. Much less is what this has to do with Ricoeur reading Heidegger, of all “philosophers.”) At any rate, too much insistence on subjectivism must be exercised with care.

It is already difficult enough to see to a general consensus concerning the evaluation of what we might call the *Three Ps*: possibility, probability, plausibility – perhaps simply because we don’t dispose of any criteriology in regard to things which have either not happened yet or could have happened otherwise. And, incidentally, there is a major rub here: “it could have happened otherwise” is basically an affirmation whereas “what if?” is just a question. These two easily differentiable approaches to what should perhaps best be called conjectural history are based on rather unacceptable allegations or, alternatively, series of queries. The latter variant is by far preferable.

Hierarchies of probability are challenging to establish and, to a certain extent, inevitably arbitrary. I think that a way out of the respective dilemmas resides in a novel technique which I’d like to refer to as *double-ended concatenations*. Both directions, then, remember. The present perspective being characterized by its focal point of reasoning for the future as well as for the past, there are, in a manner of speaking, beams of rays discharged forward and

backward, in a retrospective as well as in a prospective manner. That is to say, it has to be kept in mind that the inherent uncertainty of the future will always be the same at each given point in time. On the other hand, the views from the respective observation points are in constant motion and are always directed backwards *and* forwards (which is a constant) while the retrospective perception changes with each step forward (thus inducing variables). And that, in turn, permanently changes the expectations.

Whether we acknowledge it or not, we always concatenate different pasts, regardless of whether they've happened or just could have happened, and project them unto the future, collating them with future prospects, never mind their degree of plausibility. And these possibilities, plausibilities and probabilities – the *Three Ps* of counterfactual history –, as we have just noted, are, if at all, close to impossible to determine: who'd have seriously expected a catastrophic economic crisis only two or three years ago? Still, it would have been nice to do something about it – in time. Prerequisite would have been more disciplined thinking about the future, learnable not least by counterfactuals.

To get back – for some concluding arguments – to the example of France's defeat in 1940 (and employing it as a model case). The wavering in regard to the inevitability of the defeat (or its contrary) depends on assessments at any given moment, implying not least expectancies. Obviously, it is a hindrance to think but of inferred French *grandeur*, past and present, and thus, by extension, also expected eminence. If one supposes the defeat of 1940 to be strange, much of today's (and, consequently, tomorrow's) encumbrances remain more or less inexplicable; once one is prepared to see the downfall of 1940 merely as a result of inept military leadership, political deadlock and a calamitous general morale, today's problems become comprehensible, thus "soluble", and tomorrow's challenges can at least be faced.

To arrive at a thinkable retrospective scenario of France successfully fending off Germany, you have to "posit" a different past – in order to conceptually "achieve" those other collective mentalities I've been driving at –, and you also have to be more sanguine about the future because France's defeatist, morose and depressed attitude subsists. Yet most importantly we have to appreciate that there are many ways to achieve this "fiction." In this sense there *is* symmetry to past and future histories, seen from the respective focal point of pondering the countless alternatives which have existed and which will exist.

The hinge is our present understanding. In regard to the past, our having survived 1962 (taken as an example), Robert O'Connell has expressed it like this: "Whether [Khrushchev's alleged] proposal would have allowed the U.S. and Soviet leadership to steer away from impending catastrophe remains today a matter of speculation" (O'Connell 2003). (I can't go into the contents of said proposal; anyway, in our present context it is just a matter of the "speculation" anyway.) We cannot really answer the question: but that must not prevent us from posing it. Because it is essential to pose correlative questions in regard to

the future, for instance the following one: will it be possible to make non-proliferation work at least in a way as to preclude terrorists getting free access to nuclear devices? That, today, also remains a matter of speculation. The more we “speculate” about it – i.e., imagine what even a few terrorist attacks carried out with nuclear (or biological and chemical) weapons would actually look like and result in –, the more meaningful our chances get of *doing* the things necessary to keep exactly that from happening.

Naturally, there is the cynical assumption that there is no such thing as historical experience: we can’t “learn” anything from history, we are condemned to go on acting in terms of necessities, deterministic courses of history and inescapabilities. But that’s exactly the point: our “anticipative thinking” has to be developed in ways which make supposedly unforeseeable events at least thinkable, and we can learn doing so by studying the past possibilities.

The very logic of counterfactual thinking consists in contrasting assumable options – and then saying, for instance, this or that past alternative is or would have been preferable or more plausible. Intelligently assessing possible futures necessitates the weighing of alternative options *plus considering the past alternatives*. We can’t change these – but they can teach us to choose in a rational way from now on.

The assumption of a stereotyped, seemingly unchangeable “run of history” – supposedly governing expected future experiences as well as unchangeable past ones – makes the achievable learning curve depressingly flat. Expectability appears as a function of constructive imagination – in regard to the past as well as to the future. Without mastering the former, our counterfactuals, there are few chances to do better henceforward. We’d be well advised to savvy that there is no absolute necessity out there: it might all be over tomorrow, just as it is more plausible to state retrospectively – expressed in a paradoxical fashion – that “we didn’t survive the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.”

We should most emphatically insist on “pluralities of the past” – they exist anyway in the sense of conflicting, indeed not seldom contradictory interpretations of History (just think of Pieter Geyl’s book on Napoleon [Geyl 1964]) – in order to get a clearer picture of what we, on the one hand, expect from the future and what, secondly, we’d wish it to look like. The latter, however, implies the willingness to become proactive on the basis of well defined and arguable concepts. If we are not ready to do that, our further social existence will lead to nothing but valediction without end. Or simply the end. Period.

References

- Bobbitt, Philip. 2002. *The Shield of Achilles. War, Peace and the Course of History*. London: Penguin.
- . 2007. *Terror and Consent. The Wars for the Twenty-first Century*. London: Allen Lane.

- Churchill, Winston S. 1931. "If Lee had not won the Battle of Gettysburg." In: J.C. Squire (ed.): *If it had happened otherwise. Lapses into Imaginary History*. London, New York, Toronto: Longmans, Green, pp. 193-196.
- Cook, Theodore F., jr. 2000. "Our Midway Disaster. Japans Spring a Trap, June 4, 1942." In: Robert Cowley (ed.): *What If? The World's Foremost Military Historians Imagine What Might Have Been*. New York: Berkley, pp. 311-340.
- Ferguson, Niall (ed.). 1997. *Virtual History. Alternatives and Counterfactuals*. London: Picador.
- Flynn, Michael F. 1998. "The Forest of Time." In: Gardner Dozois, Stanley Schmidt (eds.): *Roads Not Taken. Tales of Alternate History*. New York: Del Rey / Ballantine, pp. 181-250.
- Geyl, Pieter. 1964 (1949). *Napoleon, For and Against*. New Haven, London: Yale U.P.
- Hellekson, Karen. 2001. *The Alternate History. Refiguring Historical Time*. Kent OH, London: Kent State U.P.
- Kershaw, Ian. 2008. *Fateful Choices. Ten Decisions that Changed the World, 1940-1941*. London: Penguin.
- Lehane, Dennis. 2006. *Coronado*. London (etc.): Bantam.
- O'Connell, Robert L. 2003. "The Cuban Missile Crisis: Second Holocaust." In: Robert Cowley (ed.): *What Ifs? of American History. Eminent Historians Imagine What Might Have Been*. New York: Berkley, pp. 251-272.
- Schmid, Georg. 2009. *The Narrative of the Occident. An Essay on its Present State*. Frankfurt, New York (etc.): Lang.
- Schroeder, Paul W. 2007. "Necessary conditions and World War I as an unavoidable war." In: Gary Goertz, Jack S. Levy (eds.): *War and Peace. Case Studies and Necessary Conditions Counterfactuals*. London, New York: Routledge, pp. 147-193.
- Thompson, William R. 2007. "Powderkegs, sparks and World War I." In: *ibid.*, pp. 113-145.